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FACULTY OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES AND LITERATURES**

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Deceiving 'Primitivism'. Ainu People in 1910s Travelogues

Marcos Centano¹

Abstract: *This work assesses the representation of the Ainu people through the early travelogues made in Japan during the 1910s, focusing on those made by Benjamin Brodsky. Considering filmic representation of the Ainu people in relation to their social context, the analysis reveals how these images projected a deceptive ethnicity belonging to a time prior to the moment they were filmed. Filmmakers created an imagery of the “primitive Ainu” aimed at attracting a Western audience by showing an exoticism of a cultural and geographically distant people.*

These images projected a historical view of the Ainu, concealing their adaptation to modern life and assimilation to the Japanese culture and way of life. A critical approach to these captivating images reveals the premeditated construction of Ainu ethnicity, and casts doubt on the validity of these moving images as a social witness.

Keywords: *Ainu, travelogue, ethnographic documentary, Benjamin Brodsky, otherness*

*What we are facing now is neither the
Ainu as a race nor the Ainu as a people
but simply Ainu as a situation.
A situation in which people call us Ainu
And the meaning of that Ainu
comes to constrain our lives*

Masao Sasaki. *We Humans*, 1973²

Introduction

The Ainu are a minority in Japan whose population is mainly concentrated on the island of Hokkaido, although their lands expanded along the Sea of Okhotsk until the 20th century, including the Kuril Islands and Kamchatka Peninsula on the current Russian side³. Originally, the Ainu remained ethnically different from the rest of the

¹ Lecturer, Centre for Film Studies, SOAS, University of London, UK

² Cited in Winchester (2009, 1).

³ Evidence suggests that there are still between a hundred and a couple of thousand Ainu descendants living in Russia today.

Japanese (*wajin* or *Yamato* people), spoke a language different from their neighbours and preserved an ancestral culture which descended from a mixture of Satsumon, Okhotsk and Jōmon cultures.

Despite this, the Japanese parliament only passed a resolution that recognised the Ainu as the indigenous people of Japan in 2008, one year after the United Nations issued the Draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (Cotterill 2011). This historical landmark fuelled an increase in public discourse on Ainu issues that paralleled an increasing number of films about the Ainu and several documentaries were released soon after. Hiroshi Moriya directed *Tokyo Ainu* (2011) which was sponsored by the Tokyo Ainu Association; Hideki Komatsu made *Kamui to Ikiru* (Living with Gods, 2011), which focuses on the life of the life of the Ainu activist in Tokyo, Haruzo Urakawa (co-founder of the Tokyo Ainu Association), and prompted by the growing interest in the revival of Ainu culture, I made *Ainu. Pathways to Memory* (2014). This documentary was a result of six years of research starting in 2009, during which I explored the strategies developed to recover, promote and disseminate Ainu culture in recent years. The study turned out to be an enriching experience that allowed me to meet Ainu people living as far from Hokkaido as Tokyo, and to learn different ways in which they played with their Ainu identity and adapted it to modern life.

Half-way through the project, I noticed that the diversity of the Ainu community made it necessary to have a self-reflexive approach towards the mechanisms of representation. To that end it, was essential to know what the previous film representations of the Ainu have been. As a result, I discovered that films on the Ainu people were not a new phenomenon. In fact, they were as old as cinema made in Japan: the Ainu people were featured among the earliest thirty-three *actualités* shot in Japan in 1897, which were titled *Les Aïnous à Yéso* and filmed by the Lumière brothers' camera operator François-Constant Girel (cfr. Anderson and Richie 1982, 25; Okada 1999, 187-192; Nornes 2003, 2-3). Two more *actualités* were filmed at the end of the Meiji Period (1868-1912), one shot by the Japanese anthropologist Torii Ryūzō known for his studies on the Kuroile Ainu- and another one produced by the French company, Pathé Frères. This was the *actualités*' golden age, as their production was cheaper and easier than fiction narratives (Musser 1994, 232).

However, during the first half of the Taishō period (1912-1926), the astonishment produced by these short sequences, which rarely lasted longer than one minute, had diminished and the medium reached a fresh realism through a new genre named *travelogues*, or travel documentaries, pioneered by the North American entrepreneur William Nicholas Selig

(Griffiths 2002: 204)⁴. Selig developed a profitable business by producing films based on expeditions across the World, among them the first *travelogue* featuring the Ainu people, *The Ainu of Japan* (1913), which was made by Frederick Starr, professor at the University of Chicago when he visited between 1909 and 1910 (Erish 2012: 148)⁵.

The aim of this article is to interrogate the representation of the Ainu people in two of these films made at the end of the decade; *Beautiful Japan* (1918) and *A Trip through Japan with the YWCA* (1919) by Benjamin Brodsky, a Russian-American producer who had founded the Asia Film Company in 1909, the earliest motion picture company in China (Kar and Bren 2000). Methodologically, I contextualise the images to see what they tell us about the moment in which they were filmed. The goal of this study is two-fold: first, to evaluate the nature of these early representations, in other words, assessing cinema's validity as a tool for ethnographic analysis and as a witness of history; second, to identify film practices of the time, taking the cinematographic device as an object of study. Unavoidably, this analysis takes contributions provided by visual anthropology, from those studies on cinema as an ethnographic tool, i.e., as a means of obtaining insight into the filmed culture (Ruby, Ardévol), to the critical studies on visual representation and ideology (Martínez, Worth).

Travelogues and New Realism in 1910s

Non-fiction formats had quickly developed in Japan after the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905). Viewers demanded a new sense of realism, which according to Komatsu, was due to a shift from itinerant troupes to permanent cinemas (Simon 2002, 64-69; Waka 1997, 19). The first permanent theatre in Japan was Denkikan, in Asakusa district, Tokyo, which opened in November 1903 (Simon 2002, 91). Denkikan's success inspired other cinemas and more permanent cinemas were built in other prefecture capitals. By 1917, there were already sixty-four permanent cinemas in Japan and twenty-one in Asakusa (Greenberg 2001: 7).

By the end of the second half of the 1910s, the audience did not see films as a mere novelty, and, as Komatsu (1994, 4-5) noted, the consolidation of permanent theatres helped cinema to establish its autonomy from other arts and means of entertainment. During the 1910s, film narration experienced a qualitative leap from the earlier *jiji eiga* ("actuality films") or *actualités*. The astonishment produced by the

⁴ Burton Holmes, Selig's old friend, popularised the term *travelogue* through his conferences on trips that he used in his documentaries (Griffiths 2002: 204).

⁵ From the footage obtained after the trip to Japan, Starr made another film, *In Japan* (1911).

first moving images was over and audiences were demanding more complex stories. This was how the *travelogues*, or travel documentaries, became a popular genre by the end of the decade. These were much longer films lasting even an hour, which presented a random succession of *actualités* to create a sense of continuity between scenes. They were integrated into a proto-narration, a macro-structure that was built around the idea of “journey”. The trip across exotic geographies became the repetitive basic pattern on which these films were based.

Benjamin Brodsky was another pioneer of this genre. He had founded the Asia Film Company in 1909, the earliest motion picture company in China, where he made his first travelogue, *A Trip Through China* (1916) (Kar and Bren 2000). At the end of the decade, he travelled to Japan and reached an agreement with the construction company *Nihon Kokuyū Tetsudō* and Japan Travel Bureau (*Nihon Kōtsū Kōsha*) which sponsored *Beautiful Japan* (1918) (Tseng 2013, 7-46; Curry 2011, 58-94). Brodsky donated a 16mm copy of *Beautiful Japan* to the U.S. ambassador to Japan. Afterwards, the ambassador’s family gave it to the Human Science Film Archive (Smithsonian Institute). This work was a full-length documentary lasting for one hour and forty minutes, structured as a 5,800-mile trip from South to North, starting in Nagasaki and ending in Hokkaido.

Ainu Primitivism vs Japanese Modernisation

Brodsky depicted an encounter with a world unknown by the Western audience, which is carefully dissected in scenes introduced by intertitles written in English. The film opens with a departing train and medium shot of Brodsky showing on a map the journey that the spectator is invited to take. After that, we find a display of images depicting a Japan that is full of contrasts. He documents the industrialisation of the country, such as the ceremony of charting a ship at Asano ship-yard, Yokohama. The festive images are remarkable for the huge size of the ocean-liners, which show the great industrial power achieved by the emerging Japanese empire. A wide shot is followed by closer pan capturing the labourers handling the machinery at the shipyard. The film also presents markets, crammed streets and factories from Nagasaki, Kobe, Kyoto, Tokyo and Hakodate. On the other hand, Brodsky also showed the world of tradition: the Imperial Palace, cormorant fishing in Nagara river, sumo matches, *sakura matsuri* (cherry blossom festival) and tea picking in Shizuoka. It is worth noting the omnipresence of children populating all these images, which shows a society comprised of large families that are not so common any more in contemporary Japan.

The film displays a country full of contrasts, and a clash between tradition and modernity, rural and urban life. In *A Trip through Japan with the YWCA*, Brodsky reused footage from *Beautiful Japan* and added new scenes. *A Trip through Japan with the YWCA* is preserved at National Film and Sound Archive (NFSA) of Australia although George Eastman House in the U.S. holds a digital copy of this film as well. The succession of images in this second film is even more contradictory; Japan is at times represented as a sophisticated civilisation, e.g. in the scene of a group of geishas playing the *tsuru-kame*, Turtle and Crane Dance, which eventually features Brodsky dancing with one of the ladies; and people dressed in elegant kimonos along a river coast celebrating the *sakura* or Cherry Blossom Festival. Nevertheless, at times Japan is shown as chaotic, dirty and still a developing country. It includes a scene of a group of labourers paving a road by hand with rudimentary tools.

This second *travelogue* was sponsored by the Young Women's Christian Association (YMCA) and an intertitle states: "The Y.W.C.A. went to Japan at the request of missionaries and leading Japanese to do special work with women and girls". This is probably the reason Brodsky added several sequences focusing on women's working and living conditions. Women are portrayed laundering clothes in a river, harvesting in rice terraces and working in factories. A shot featuring ragged female workers, pushing wagons in and out of a factory with bandages on their heads, is introduced by an intertitle announcing that thousands of women die of tuberculosis every year.

Both films feature the Ainu culture in Shiraoi village, Hokkaido in sequences that barely last for three minutes. The images of Japanese industrial power, railways and the bustle of the cities contrast with the calm *kotan* (Ainu village). Even the images of dirty streets and ragged workers are significantly different from the Ainu scenes for one reason: the rate of development. We see people adapting to modern life, even if it is an ongoing process; however, all marks of modernity are missing in the scenes portraying the Ainu, who live in a romanticised and bucolic landscape. The camera panning to introduce the isolated houses of a *kotan*, hidden in the forest and only connected through thin pathways, suggests the idea of a primitive and isolated people.

Both documentaries seek to represent a mysterious "other", different from the other Japanese citizens, linked to a traditional, mythical and ritualized past. After the opening shots featuring the landscape and the thin pathways reaching the remote village, Brodsky shows a small group of nine women on one side and ten men on the other. A clumsy panning camera features the group sitting in front of a *chise* and dressed up in traditional garments made of vegetable fibre

(*attus*) and cotton (*ruunpe*). The subsequent take show a medium-shot of four women who are adorned filmed with Ainu necklaces (*tamasai*) and the viewer can spot the traditional female tattoo around the lips of some of them. That is followed by another shot of three headmen (*ekashi*) with long beards who are portrayed wearing crowns made of wood fiber with bundles of partially-shaved wood (*paunpe*, or *sapanupe*). Then, the bear cub is noosed and pulled out from its cage. The following scene features men drinking *sake* in their lacquer cups *tuki* and offering it to their gods using their *ikupasui*, wooden carved ceremonial sticks. Apart from this, in *A Trip through Japan with the YWCA*, some shots were added, portraying a dance in large circles (*rimse*) called *tapkara* (lit. “doing claps”) that traditionally elderly members of the community perform after the sacrifice.

These films thereby reproduce previous stereotypes of Ainu as savage people whose primitivism opposed Japanese modernisation. This imagery was available in earlier moving images and was linked to an exoticism that had been previously disseminated in 19th-century photography and earlier paintings and engravings (Bressner 2009)⁶. Thus, the ethnographic construction of Ainu identity must be understood as the result of a combination of intertextual references representing the “primitive” as an inferior “other” to be soon defeated by civilisation (Martinez 1995, 368). In a way, the images of Ainu people isolated in remote forests and linked to their ancestral traditions constituted the photographic negative of the Japanese people, whose engagement in modernisation pervades the mechanisms of representation of the time.

“Vanishing people”

The opening scene in *Beautiful Japan* also presents “extinction” as a recurrent feature in the codification of Ainu representation, which characterised the foreign gaze. In the first intertitle of the Ainu sequence one can read: “The Ainus [sic] were the original inhabitants of Japan, but like the American Indians they are now a fast vanishing race... Driven up into the Northern Island by Japanese civilization, they still retain many of their semi-barbarous customs.”

Defining the Ainu as “vanishing people” is a trait that pervades all film representations of the time. This idea cemented all ethnographic approaches of the time, presenting these visual constructions as the last chance to see a people in danger of extinction. However, according to official censuses, the Ainu population had remained more-or-less stable

⁶ See collections of Hirasawa Byozan's paintings on the Ainu at the British Museum and pictures taken by 19th century German explorers held at Stuttgart Linden Museum.

over the years (Muñoz González 2008, 107). According to the official census, Ainu population did not vary significantly between 1873 and 1936. Assimilation to Japanese culture promoted by successive governments and the massive arrival of Japanese settlers during the early 20th century caused the percentage of Ainu in Hokkaido to decrease from 14.63% to 0.54% and thus, fuelling the impression that the Ainu were becoming extinct. Therefore, it should be noted that what was defined as “vanishing” was actually the effect of a specific policy including unequal land distribution, settlements and cultural assimilation.

This shows how these early cinematic portrayals were ideologically motivated and contained misunderstanding and prejudices concerning the Ainu people rather than a faithful representation of their social reality. The notion of “vanishing people” was used to present a community condemned to extinction as a consequence of their inability to adapt themselves to modern civilisation. Western ideas of social Darwinism had reached Japan during the Meiji period (Muñoz González 2008, 90-96) and documentary-makers showed a primitivism considered the result of an inferior culture that was doomed to extinction. This discourse was officially promoted during Japanese modernity and the simultaneous colonisation of Hokkaido, in which Japan started to define herself as a ‘civilised country’ and the Ainu served as a yardstick against which Japanese progress could be measured, although stereotypes contrasting civilised and barbarian had been produced by Japanese travellers from Edo period (1603-1868) (Siddle 1997, 138).

It is interesting to note how the colonial policy fed this ethnographic portrayal and vice-versa. Thus, the idea of “extinction” supported a discourse in which the disappearance of Ainu was a natural consequence of development rather than as the result of a deliberate policy implemented by the national and local authorities at the last stage of Meiji Restoration. Having said that, some ideas on assimilation (*dōka*) began to be proposed from early 20th century, as the proper way to protect the Ainu, and this should take place through hybridisation (*konwa*) and fusion (*yūgō*) according to which Wajin would “educate” the Ainu and teach them Japanese customs (Siddle 1997, 147). By the early 1930’s, some voices started defend that assimilation should be achieved through miscegenation, denying the idea of extinction and claiming that Ainu blood would continue in the veins of the “Yamato race” (Kita 1993, 27; Siddle 1997, 149).

Martinez (1995) alerts us to how ethnographic films often reproduce hegemonic discourses on civilisation and “savage people”, which is why a film cannot be defined as ethnographic in itself, but only in relation to the interests it is subjected to. The image of the “primitive”

is mediated by the explorer or anthropologist's authoritative interpretation, which eventually creates images to reaffirm their ethnocentric beliefs (Martínez 1995, 364). As a consequence, these early ethnographic approaches helped to strengthen negative prejudices towards an ethnographic group rather than facilitate any true knowledge. Therefore, if we are to extract any insight from these images, it is essential to put them into dialogue with those hegemonic discourses, identifying their aims, the audience to which they are addressed and their production circumstances. Also, Raymond (2009) has provided a significant contribution to understanding how the concept of "hegemony" implies the existence of a structure where certain cultural, economic and political elite imposes its own narratives. In light of this discussion, the researcher's role should be identifying ideological transgressions and contextualising in order to obtain a scientific knowledge.

These critical approaches from visual anthropology during the last decades have been instrumental to question cinema's capacity to become a social witness, which has often been assigned too prematurely. Rather than a faithful representation of reality, films are a reflection of an ideological discourse (Martínez 1995, 372). Generally, contemporary approaches assume there is always an implicit reader in an image, and the study of these images consists to a great extent in redefining the reader of the time in which they were screened (Martínez 1995, 371; McDougal 1992: 412). Now, the reading is conditioned by dominant narratives creating the image of a "primitive" as inferior and yet to be "civilised" and "enlightened by civilisation" (Martínez 1995, 372).

Sigried Kracauer's visionary work on how films may project the mentality of a nation (Kracauer 1947) and other works assessing examples in which fantasy can be studied as a result of actuality (1997, 77-90) provided a theoretical basis for a more recent movement away from a negative assessment of the cinematic uses. In recent years, authors in the fields of Sociology of Cinema have sought to obtain insight from subjective elements in the representation rather than valorising empirical truth and objectivity, providing epistemological keys to assess how visual representations are shaped by the context in which they are created and consumed. Pierre Sorlin opened up a modern methodological approach warning about the uselessness of using cinema to understand the profilmic reality, as every film could be considered an ideological expression of the time (Sorlin 1996, 263-265). More recently, archaeologists of images such as Sánchez-Biosca (2008, 38) have demonstrated how images can be an enriching object of study if they are interrogated as blatant manipulations since, after all, they do not reproduce facts, only represent them. As a consequence, they show only

one version of reality but this version enables theorists to trace synchronic interests of the society in which they are used.

Other discussion led by historians has revolved around the possibilities of using historical films as a source of academic enquiry, and they have provided examples to demonstrate that films have not always reproduced dominant modes of representation and thought (Rosenton 2013; Francaviglia & Rodnitzky 2007; Landy 1997). Rosenton draws his theory on Hayden White's critical approach who assessed historical narrative as a literary genre and as a consequence, as a construction. Thus, Rosenton starts from an accurate premise: films, just like written history, create rather than represent but both can be understood as a valid way of doing history and provides examples of legitimate mode of recounting history (Rosenton 1995a, 1995b; Rosenton and Parvulescu 2013).

Deceptive images

Despite the examples provided by theorists of historical films evidencing attempts to counteract dominant narratives, Landy has explored how cinema in general has played a crucial role creating a popular history aimed at the broadest possible audiences, throughout which they have feed hegemonic conceptions of nation and ethnicity (Landy 1997, 1-30). Thus, early ethnographic films are not necessarily different from entertainment films regarding their attempt to create a unified ideological position on cultures. By the time Brodsky's *travelogues* were filmed, the Ainu were suffering from a long-standing discrimination and cultural assimilation begun by different Japanese governments during the late Edo period (1603–1868). The Japanisation of Hokkaido was intensified from the Meiji Restoration (1868–1912) under the slogan *bunmei kaika* ("civilisation and enlightenment"). From 1880 until 1912, the country sought to equip itself with a modern ideology (Gluck 1983, 3), Shinto was promulgated as a State religion and the nationalist idea of the national "Japanese family" (*kokka kazoku*) with the Emperor at the top of this structure increasingly expanded and grounded the "Imperial System Ideology" (*tennōsei ideorogī*) introduced by the Meiji Constitution of 1890. In Hokkaido, the Development Commission, which was established in 1869, banned many Ainu customs, such as female tattoos and male earrings from 1871. Moreover, they encouraged farming to the detriment of traditional hunting and the acquisition of the Japanese language over the Ainu language. Eventually, Ainu assimilation to Japanese culture was officially enacted in the 1899 *Hokaidō kyūdojin hogohō* ("Hokkaido Former Aborigine Protection Law"). Many Ainu customs and traditions were forbidden, people lost their names, and they were forced to change

their life-style, from 'hunter-gather' to 'labourer' for the Japanese factories and fishing industry.

Interestingly, this bucolic representation of the Ainu people apparently isolated from and alien to modernisation contrasted with the everyday life of this community and as a consequence, these films may be significantly misleading. Moreover, it is essential to keep in mind when interrogating these early representations on the Ainu that they were filmed by outsiders, Japanese and Western operators, rather than an Ainu individual. In other words, they are films on the Ainu people, rather than Ainu people's films. This fact plays a key role in articulating the "otherness" that characterised these portrayals (Dubreil 2004; Weiner 1997).

The *raison d'être* for these films made by foreigners, which outnumbered those by made Japanese, was the fascination for the Ainu culture that arose in the West between the late 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. This interest was fuelled by the idea that the Ainu were a Caucasian people lost in East Asia (Siddle 1997, 140). Interestingly, anthropologists often sought their own origins in the Ainu people. An introductory intertitle in *A Trip through Japan with the YWCA* states "The Anus [sic] are the aboriginal people of north Japan. They are related to the white race". The idea that the Ainu had Caucasian origins spread from late 19th century given their singular physical traits. Yet, the Ainu never claimed any kinship to the white man (Kawamura 1934). During this period, portrayals presented an ideal personification of the noble savage which would shift quickly to a more negative view of the Ainu as an inferior race later throughout the 20th century (Kreiner 1993, 33-34). Evidence of this phenomenon is the collections on Ainu culture proliferating in European museums of the time, such as the British Museum, the Linden Museum of Stuttgart, the Musée d'Ethnographie de Neuchâtel and GRASSI Museum in Leipzig⁷. However, this growing interest among European explorers, adventurers, operators and audiences was fuelled by a misconception of who the Ainu were at the time, undermining their cultural assimilation as well as their political and economic discrimination. These images are consequently deceptive, as they fail to capture the rapid changes Ainu community was involved in. We can identify a number of examples in both *Beautiful Japan* and *A Trip through Japan with the YWCA*.

First, Brodsky offered one of the few existing visual documents of the Bear Ceremony (*iyomante*), which is often regarded as quintessential to Ainu identity⁸. Both films present sequences taken

⁷ For an account on the Ainu collections in Europe, see Kreiner (1993: 25-30).

⁸ For an account on the early film representations of the Ainu Bear Ceremony see

from the same festival held in Shiraoi, Hokkaido, probably in 1917. However, one key aspect of the ceremony was not captured by Brodsky: in Ainu belief, the bear is the reincarnation of the Mountain God and the goal of this ceremony is the ritual sacrifice of the bear in order to send its spirit off to the mountains; this essential part of the festival is not included in the montage. Was it Brodsky's deliberate decision or did the sacrifice never really take place? The truth is that by the time Brodsky reached Hokkaido, the bear ceremony was in rapid decline due to successive prohibitions that date back to the Edo period together with restrictions on hunting and fishing which prevented the Ainu from preserving other traditions such as the Celebration of Salmon Harvest (*asircep-nomi*) (Siddle 1996: 131). As a consequence, bear ceremonies were infrequent in the late 1910's. These old traditions continued only in some remote villages which, in many cases, were places where the Ainu had been relocated when their lands were unilaterally appropriated in the name of development by the Japanese state.

However, Shiraoi was relatively close to the capital city Sapporo, which was 80 kilometres away and could be covered in a one-day trip by horse and carriage. This town had become a destination for explorers seeking an encounter with the Ainu people from the late 19th century. Its inhabitants had started to arrange exhibitions of their culture, which were increasingly professionalized, and the village had become a kind of tourist resort by the 1910's. Some of these ceremonies were only performed for visitors and researchers, and the Ainu created venues like Shiraoi to meet the Japanese and foreign demand. Thus, the *iyomante* began to be held as a tourist representation (Ogawa 1997). In fact, comparing other bear ceremonies captured a few years later by Hatta Saburō in 1926, Neil Gordon Munro in 1930 and Inukai Tetsuo in 1936, it is easy to note that Brodsky's film features a cub that is visibly too young for the sacrifice and it was probably taken out of the cage just to be filmed before the camera.

As a consequence, this ethnic representation is an ideological and material result of the specific colonial policy: First, visitors could reach these villages with an apparent 'vanishing people' precisely because of the forced relocation of the Ainu and because Japanese companies, and later travel agencies, employed the Ainu for this business. Thus, travellers would experience an encounter with an artificial community, through a performance that involved all the members of a community that was, however, comprised of real people and real relationships. Second, the material consequences of colonial rule prompted the Ainu to engage in these activities of welcoming visitors that ironically ended up

Centeno (2018).

strengthening the ideological aspect of this artifice as well. Land ordinances were legitimised by the narratives of racial inferiority and primitivism and simultaneously, the narratives existing in these film representations in turn, legitimised legal inequalities. The discussions carried out on the ethnofiction genre led by Jean Rouch in the postwar period also provided enriching contributions to clarify why filmmaker does not capture “pure” events; their presence unavoidable interferes with the events they register and without a self-reflexive attitude end up contributing to the structures of domination used to legitimise inequalities.



A Trip through Japan with the YWCA (B. Brodsky, 1919) (left).
The Ainu Bear Festival (N. G. Munro, 1931) (right).

A second example of the insistent attempts to present the Ainu as a people stuck in their past is the repetitive portrayal of female tattoo. Brodsky adds a closeup of four women with these tattoos around their lips. An intertitle introduces the scenes as follows: “The husbands take no chance of a lost wedding ring. Every woman after marriage has her mouth tattooed...” Originally, female tattoos were used as a protection against evil spirits, but nothing is explained about the spiritual nature of this custom⁹. Indeed, tattoos had been a prerequisite for women to marry an Ainu man (Hilger 1971, 152); however, this practice had been subject to persecution from 1871 and by the time Brodsky visited Shiraoi, most Ainu women had already abandoned this practice. While some tattoos were more likely to be found on older women, those featured on screen are significantly younger, obviously born after the prohibitions. Images again project a deceptive reality. In fact, the tattoos shown on screen seem artificially painted black, which was probably done due to the weak light sensitivity of the cameras of that time but it is also true that it was a common practice when women attended festivals (Muñoz González 2008, 108). Explorers, anthropologists and filmmakers of the

⁹ The spiritual value of the female tattoo among the Ainu was already documented by Batchelor (1901, 20-32).

time participated in creating this view to other indigenous cultures and articulated images of the “primitive” as a metaphor of the past rather than a showcase of the present.

Absent Images in the representation

The contradictions in these films can be found not only in what is displayed on screen but also in what is not shown. Sorlin had already pointed out that films became a privileged document of what is not told (Sorlin 1985, 25) and along the same lines, Ferro noted films’ capacity to show hidden aspects of a society and opened the possibility to interrogate both, what a society confesses about itself and what it denies (Ferro 1995, 17). These contributions provide key epistemological tools to interrogate how Brodsky’s *travelogues* neglected many other aspects of Ainu culture, which had been transformed not only by the Japanese but also by Western influences during the Meiji and Taishō eras. Foreign missionary schools had been established in Hokkaido from the second half of the 19th century and paradoxically, many Ainu had learned to write the Latin alphabet before Japanese, which for many of them was an unknown language (Owell 2004: 5-29). Furthermore, part of the community was replacing animist beliefs with Christianity as well as Buddhism and Shinto. The number of Shinto missionaries reached its peak in the decade of 1870’s once Shinto was promulgated as the state religion (Gluck 1985: 18). During the Taishō era, the Japanese government promoted a new education in which local and religious differences were unified under the new Nation-State. As a result, the apparent exoticism of the Ainu contrasted with a reality of religious and linguistic assimilation.

All these images were characterized by a distant gaze that did not try to denounce Ainu poverty or social exclusion or to explore further problems such as alcoholism (Siddle 1996: 125, 137) but rather aimed to astonish Western audiences with exotic images of an unknown world. Thus, none of these sequences shot in Japan made reference to a political agenda. Japan was immersed in vertiginous changes of all kinds. New generations started to consider the Meiji Restoration a failed revolution. Liberal ideas expanded during Taishō democracy and socialist organisations proliferated (Gluck 1985: 277). A new “Social Office” (*shakai kyoku*) was created within the Ministry of Home Affairs in 1919.

These social demands resonated with the Ainu, who organised in collectives to fight against discrimination. They created *Kaiheisha*, an Ainu left-wing association founded in Chikabumi, Hokkaido, which was

linked to the agrarian movement and the *Nōmintō*, Farmers Party (Siddle 1996: 131). Some Ainu individuals were even elected to municipal assemblies (Ainu Bunka 2011: 9). These were also years of rapid industrialisation and huge migration from rural areas to the big cities; between 1910 and 1935 the urban population doubled in Japan (Gluck 1985: 283). They had a great impact on the life of thousands of Ainu people as well, who were involved in the growth of the working classes and engaged in urban life. This adaptation and engagement with modern life, resistance and struggle was never shown; neither generally in ethnographic films of the time nor in Brodsky's *travelogues*.

Conclusion

Thus, the social reality of the Ainu was alienated rather than explained, provoking fascination in the European spectator resulting from an apparent primitivism articulated through romantic and mythopoetic views of the Ainu. The Western eye fell into preconceived and stereotyped portrayals that had little to do with the everyday lives of the Ainu people. As a rule, Ainu adaptation to modern life remained concealed. All these examples reveal some of the contradictions related to the film representation of the Ainu, and call into question the purity invoked by the "Ainu-ness" articulated in the ethnographic works of the time.

As a consequence, Brodsky's films do not correspond to habits of the featured characters on screen but, if anything, to the life of their ancestors decades before the films were made. These early moving images were misleading; they were announced as fragments of the world, but they instead belonged to a non-existent world evoking instead, an imagined and mythical past.

These *travelogues* ignored the transformations of Ainu culture and changes that the community had had to undertake in order to adapt themselves to modern life. They also reinforced stereotypes and prejudices in the minds of both filmmakers and audiences. These portrayals of the Ainu people were comprised of fascinating but, in turn, ahistorical images; revealing the contradictions inherent in hegemonic narratives on the "other". Brodsky's films became an open window to an exotic world that was no longer available. Assimilation, discrimination and adaptation to modernity were neglected in order to produce powerful images of individuals from another time.

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